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BRITISH POETRY OF TWO WORLD WARS

MY predecessors in this series of lectures had a much more difficult task than I. In composing their lectures, they did valuable research; in composing mine, I have done nothing but remember. They had to explore the vast continents of history; I have only to wander in what Stevenson calls "the green enchanted forest of boyhood." They had to have the vision to look back through twenty-five centuries; I have to look back through only twenty-five years.

But though their task was more difficult, it was, I am sure, less disturbing. To read in history of 60,000 Romans slain at Cannae 2100 years ago brings no such anguish to the heart as to remember one boy who sat in one's class a year ago, and is now a skeleton beneath some far-off sea. To read of English victories, those centuries ago, at Agincourt, Blenheim, and Waterloo exalts the spirit; but to remember the fruitless victory achieved twenty-odd years ago in the war to end war only depresses the spirit.— Perhaps, after all, Samuel Butler was right when he said: "Only a fool would remember anything that happened more than a week ago unless it were pleasant!"

I. THE POET AND TOTAL WAR

In the four or five years before the First World War something like a boom in poetry was taking place in England. "No one can question," says the great critic Edmund Gosse, "that the generation which just preceded the War

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was remarkable for the universality of its interest in verse. Never before, except during a few late years of Elizabeth's reign, were there so many poets alive in England in proportion to the number of inhabitants."

For reasons that need not be enlarged upon here, much of the English poetry written just prior to the outbreak of the War was about England—but not about England of the Empire, or of the Royal Navy, or of the Army, or of commerce, or of democracy. It was a poetry (called even then "Georgian poetry") about rural England, a bucolic poetry. In delicately colored descriptions or almost scientifically exact naturalism it celebrated the lovely charms of England's garden-like countryside—a countryside dotted with picturesque villages, checkered with colorful fields and meadows, traversed by highways and footpaths centuries old, ornamented everywhere by quiet old towns, ancient castles and manor houses, neat cottages and peaceful spires.

To poets chiefly absorbed in contemplating this beauty of rural England came the War.

This was the first example in modern history of a major total war. Since the early Middle Ages, all but a few, almost tribal, European wars had been waged by professional soldiers whose doings disturbed normal life only along the routes of their passage. England in particular had been free of direct contact with war for many centuries. But from 1914 to 1918 conditions changed in England. Universal conscription was initiated; civilians were killed in Zeppelin raids; rationing of goods was instituted; the nation's industry and economy were geared to the war effort; the very survival of the civilian population was endangered by submarines; soldiers on furlough could come home every so often, direct from the battlefields; wounded men were transferred at once from the front to hospitals in England; al-

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most every family lost a son, a brother, or a father in the War. The direct and personal nature of this War is illustrated in the story of the old Cockney woman: As she and her friend surveyed one of the daily casualty lists, she burst out indignantly, "Why, Missiz Montgomery, this 'ere ain't war; it's murder!"

A sense of intimate and active patriotism came to birth in millions of minds that, a generation previously, would have been patriotic in only the most abstract manner. The very conception of "slacker" and "slackerism" was born only in the last War. In the days of the Crimean War, or the Sepoy Mutiny, or the Boer Wars, or even the Napoleonic Wars nobody asked or expected every able-bodied young Englishman to rush to the colors. War was something remote from life.

But the first total war changed all this. Able-bodied young men, gentry and commons, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, joined the fighting forces; the conscription law took millions more; millions of women left their homes and went into the fields, factories, and hospitals, or took over jobs vacated by men who had gone to the front. War became more than a distant and romantic episode; it became the daily life of England.

Poetry and poets could not escape the infection. From the days of Chaucer right down to 1914, thousands of Englishmen had written poems about war; but those who had actually seen service on battlefields could have been numbered on one's fingers: Chaucer himself, Spenser perhaps, Ben Jonson, three or four minor seventeenth-century poets who participated vaguely in the civil wars, and that is about all. But after 1914 the number of soldier-poets became legion.

The period was one of remarkable poetic activity to begin with, as I have said. Poets grew thick as daisies every-

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where. When the War broke out, they enlisted by the score. Moreover, once men were at the front, the phantasmagoric happenings of modern war, the extraordinary scenes, and the intense emotions of fear, wonder, despair, and grief—all these combined to draw verses from men who otherwise would never have written poetry. The number of poets who were thus created by the War, together with the number who were already poets before the War began, and who participated in the fighting, mounted into hundreds, perhaps thousands. Add to this assemblage all those poets, both men and women, who did not see active service, but who, being affected in one way or another by the War, wrote poems about it—and add to these again all the poets, young and old, who began to feel, after the War itself was over, that the War had changed nearly all the conditions of their lives, and whose works reflected their disillusion and bewilderment—add all these together, and one can see that the subject of British War poetry is formidable indeed.

It was a war that affected almost every British mind capable of creating poetry. The work of men already well known (Hardy, Housman, Bridges, Noyes, Kipling, and Masfield) was influenced by the War. Many younger poets who were almost as well known as the preceding became soldiers, and sooner or later wrote War poetry. Among them were Rupert Brooke, Richard Aldington, Ford Madox Ford, Henry Newbolt, Edward Thomas, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell, Siegfried Sassoon, W. W. Gibson, Harold Monro, Edmund Blunden, and Francis Ledwidge. Furthermore, the War doubtless did much to make poets of the following soldiers—who published their first volumes of poems during or immediately after the War: Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read, Louis Golding, Charles Sorley, and W. J. Turner. Of the poets men-

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tioned here, the following were killed in action or died of wounds: Edward Thomas, Francis Ledwidge, Wilfred Owen, and Charles Sorley. Other poets who suffered a like fate, and who were celebrated during the War or just afterward were Isaac Rosenberg, R. E. Vernede, T. P. C. Wilson, T. E. Hulme, Leslie Coulson, and Alexander Robertson. Dozens of still more minor soldier-poets could be mentioned. And even this long list would not include the non-combatants who wrote War poems.

Within less than a month of the outbreak of the War at least three anthologies of war verse were issued; and before the end of 1914 at least seven more had appeared. Meanwhile scores of War poems had been published in newspapers and magazines, and a dozen or so books of War poems had been issued by individual authors.

Among so many War poets and so much War poetry, variety of ideas, subjects, and methods may be expected. But more interesting, perhaps, than the variety due to personalities is the variety developed at different stages in the four years' progress of the War. An attempt to trace this stage-by-stage development follows.

II. IDEALISTIC WAR POETRY

In general, the course of War poetry follows pretty closely what was probably the average poet's (and the average man's) personal attitude toward the War. In 1914 and on through 1915 most British War poetry was thoroughly idealistic. This idealism took several forms.

a. One form, if it may rightly be called idealism, was a certain dashing and gentlemanly love of battle. Some of the older poets who did not have to go to war, some of the women poets, and some of the young men who had never seen action were chiefly responsible for this type of War

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poetry. Among them may be mentioned Julian Grenfell, a wealthy young gentleman and professional soldier who was famous during the early years of the War for one poem, "Into Battle," written in February, 1915. The poem is instinct with the fox-hunting spirit, and shows a gruesome cheerfulness and a blood-thirstily healthy attitude toward fighting. Grenfell died of wounds in France later in 1915.

b. Another, and much more common, form of this early idealism was an almost religious feeling (often expressed in grandiloquent odes, hymns, and sonnets) that a great moral duty had been imposed upon Englishmen by the ruthless upsurge of militaristic barbarism in Germany. Yet an interesting feature of this idealism is its almost complete lack of hatred for the enemy. German youths went to war singing the "Hymn of Hate"; but it was not hatred of Germans that made England's young men enlist to fight in France. The young poet Sorley, who was killed in the War, wrote a sympathetic sonnet "To Germany," which begins thus:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
But gropers both, through fields of thought confined,
We struggle, and we do not understand.

Some other soldier-poets who took this high-minded attitude toward the War, and wrote poems in elevated style about the "struggle between light and darkness" were R. E. Vernede, Lieutenant Dyneley Hussey, Lieutenant William Hodgson, Lieutenant Arthur Jenkins, Sergeant William John Streets, and Corporal Alexander Robertson—all of them killed in the War. But more typically it was the older men (Bridges, Noyes, Binyon, and Watson, for example) who wrote these more solemn and ambitiously profound idealistic poems; or else it was women (Winifred Letts was

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the best of them), who tried in their verses to console themselves and other women for the loss of their men.

c. A third, and higher, type of idealistic War poetry expressed the feeling that the War was lifting the individual out of his private selfishness, and, by consecrating him to lofty and unselfish purposes, was creating in him a more genuine nobility than he had ever had in peace. Rupert Brooke, Leslie Coulson, Ivor Gurney, Charles Masefield, and Richard Dennys (all but Gurney dead in the War) are the outstanding names here; and Rupert Brooke's sonnet "Peace" is unquestionably the outstanding poem:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

d. A final type of idealism manifest in British War poetry is really a continuation and an intensification of that Georgian poetry of rural England that was mentioned earlier in this lecture. Idealism of this type appears at its loveliest in John Masefield's justly celebrated "August 1914." Ford Madox Ford's "Footsloggers" is typical; here the poet tells of a train-journey through England while he is on his way to France and the front:

And thro' the square
Of glass
At my elbow, as limpid as air,

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I watched our England pass. . .
The great downs moving slowly,
Far away,
The farmsteads quiet and lowly,
Passing away;
The fields newly mown
With the swathes of hay,
And the wheat just beginning to brown,
Whirling away. . .
And I thought:
"In two days' time we enter the Unknown,
But *this* is what we die for . . . As we ought. . ."
For it is for the sake of the wolds and wealds
That we die,
And for the sake of the quiet fields,
And the path through the stackyard gate. . .
That these may be inviolate.

Rupert Brooke's sonnet "The Soldier" belongs to this phase of idealistic War poetry. It is the most famous, and doubtless the best, patriotic poem written in English during the twentieth century. The circumstance that Brooke was a soldier, that he died on a military expedition to the Dardanelles, and that his body is buried far from home on the little island of Scyros in the Aegean, only adds to the high patriotic appeal of the poem. Well-known though it is, I quote it once more:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

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III. REALISTIC WAR POETRY

The second major phase through which British War poetry passed was realism. The idealists expressed sentiments about the War; the realists described scenes in the War. Truly realistic poems began to appear late in 1915, and reached their zenith in 1917. After that they became almost unexceptionally gruesome in their details, and therefore found few publishers until after the War.

a. From the very beginning of the War a good many poets wrote ostensibly realistic verse (it hardly deserves the name *poetry*) in the vein of Kipling's worst Barrack-Room Ballads. Much of this verse was humorous; some dealt with pathetic incidents; a little of it was in dialect; and practically none of it is worth remembering. Its chief trouble was its dishonesty: it pretended to be realistic, and it was not. As the War progressed, fewer and fewer of these pseudo-realistic poems appeared. Readers would not endure them. Personal experience in war service, or first-hand accounts from people who had seen war service, shortly convinced the public that modern war is not a Barrack-Room Ballad.

b. Sometime late in 1915 or early in 1916 a more genuine sort of realism invaded British War poetry. It bore a close resemblance to that Georgian nature poetry which had dominated English literature just before the War began. It was a nature poetry translated into Continental soil; it described scenes behind the various fronts, and especially, of course, in France—the French landscape with its canals and poplars and red-roofed farmhouses and blue-smocked peasants—with the same fresh sensuousness that had been used in describing English counterparts of these scenes. Robert Nichols (who lived to become a well-known playwright in the 1930's), Edmund Blunden (now a famous critic and

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editor at Oxford), and E. Wyndham Tennant (who was killed) were the most significant exponents of this type of realism.

c. The next step in the evolution of this realistic poetry was marked by a willingness to approach closer to the actual battle-line with its grim ugliness, and yet by an unwillingness to abandon entirely the now conventional celebration of England's rural beauty. One might surmise that this attempt to ride with the hounds and run with the hare would result in bad poetry; but actually it produces some of the most pleasing poetry that came out of the War. Ivor Gurney (whose volume of War poems, *Severn and Somme*, bears a highly significant title), F. W. Harvey (writing from a prison-camp in Germany), and Francis Ledwidge (killed in action) are some of the names associated with this home-thoughts-from-abroad stage of realism. But W. W. Gibson is the best known and the most gifted writer of the group. His "Before Action" is representative:

I sit beside the brazier's glow,
And, drowsing in the heat,
I dream of daffodils that blow
And lambs that frisk and bleat—

Black lambs that frolic in the snow
Among the daffodils,
In a far orchard that I know
Beneath the Malvern hills.

Next year the daffodils will blow,
And lambs will frisk and bleat;
But I'll not feel the brazier's glow,
Nor any cold or heat.

d. A final type of realistic War poetry began to appear first in 1916. Unlike the previous type, it omits consideration of remembered beauty at home, and concentrates on the savage horror of scenes at the front. Isaac Rosenberg,

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Wilfred Owen, Frederic Manning, Gilbert Frankau, W. W. Gibson at times, Robert Graves, and Siegfried Sassoon (before 1918) best represent this kind of realism. The following lines by Cecil Roberts (who himself had written, before this, some of the grandiloquently idealistic poems referred to earlier in this lecture)—the following lines show something of the growing and bitter contempt of those who had really suffered loss in the War for the idealistic and unrealistic point of view:

They send me, Charles, long letters on your death,
Full of fair phrases culled from poetry
That do not blind me—let them save their breath;
The nectared lies of immortality,
The sounding rhetoric, the pompous phrase,
The talk of supreme sacrifice, the great
Reward—what are these 'gainst your withered days,
Your dear lost face, the squalor of your fate?

That rhinoceros-hided, Tory-bred, gentleman-soldier Gilbert Frankau likewise protests, in a poem dated October 31, 1917, against the heroic and romantic concept of war that invents phrases like "our cheery wounded," "the smile of victory," "red battle's glory," "honour's utmost task," "gay jesting faces"—and he writes:

humour's just the Saxon cloak for fear. . .
Or else a trick to keep the folk at home
From being scared to death—as we are scared;
That honour . . . damn it, honour's the one thing
No soldier yaps about.

And he goes on to describe war as "naked, hideous, stupid, vile"—

A dirty, loathsome, servile murder-job:—
Men, lousy, sleepless, ulcerous, afraid,
Toiling their hearts out in the pulling slime
That cakes in itching arm-pits, navels, ears:
Men stunned to brainlessness and gibbering:
Men driving men to death and worse than death:

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Men maimed and blinded: men against machines—
Flesh versus iron, concrete, flame, wire:
Men choking out their souls in poison gas:
Men squelched into the slime by trampling feet:
Men disembowelled by guns five miles away,
Cursing, with their last breath, the living God.

Realism as pitiless as this merges almost insensibly into anti-war poetry; indeed, by its simple revelation of truth it becomes anti-war poetry. To recognize an evil is almost the same as to demand its abolition.

IV. ANTI-WAR POETRY

Of one thing in literature we may always be certain—that when George Bernard Shaw expresses an opinion, all the rest of the world is of a directly contrary opinion. Thus, when Shaw said in 1917, "War is a most pestilential nuisance," the rest of the world was, we know, not averse to war. But when he said in 1934, "Why should war be suppressed? Is it an evil? War is a method of killing people, and a great many people in this world ought to be killed," the rest of the world, we may be sure, considered war an unmitigated evil. The transition of the world's opinion from one extreme to the other has been so complete that most of us have forgotten that there was once a time when genuine anti-war sentiment, far from being universal, existed only among a relatively few liberals and zealots.

To be sure, the majority of mankind have always opposed needless wars; yet the majority of mankind have always conveniently discovered that wars are needful. British poets have always been either more belligerent or more honest than the majority of mankind: very few of them before 1917 had written anti-war poetry. The only complete anti-war poems that I can recall in significant British literature before the First World War are Southey's "The Battle of

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Blenheim," Hardy's "The Man He Killed," and Alfred Noyes's "The Wine Press"—which last, written in 1913, is a really powerful and effectively written protest against the whole idea of war, although Noyes forgot the poem as soon as the First World War broke out, and began writing almost jingoistic War poetry. As a check on my knowledge of British poetry, I looked, the other day, through four or five standard collections of quotations from poets, and read literally hundreds of poetic comments on the subject of war. Not more than half-a-dozen of these quotations had anti-war implications; and the majority of them were by one man, the eighteenth-century humanitarian poet William Cowper. Furthermore, all these quotations were only isolated lines in poems not written primarily as anti-war poems.

By the end of 1917, and throughout 1918, more than a few British poets (all of them soldiers on the fighting fronts, by the way, and none of them stay-at-home poets) began to feel that a victory for Britain's nationalistic aims could not compensate for the horror, the terror, the pain, and the slaughter being daily wrought by the War. Among the names worth mentioning here is that of Arthur Graeme West, a young Oxford man who enthusiastically enlisted at the beginning of the War, and who gradually passed from a position of delighted conformity with conventional patriotism to a position of atheism and pacifism. He was killed in 1917 at the age of twenty-six. His *Diary of a Dead Officer*, containing a few of his poems, was published in 1919, and made an international sensation at the time. Another name worth mentioning is that of Lieutenant-Colonel Maitland Hardyman, D. S. O., whose poems were also published in 1919. He was killed at the age of thirty-three. The epitaph that he wrote for himself was this: "He died as he had lived, fighting for abstract principles in a cause which he did not

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believe in." Another of these minor poets was Sub-Lieutenant Paul Bewsher, an aviator. At the very end of the War he published a volume memorable for one poem, "Nox Mortis," which describes a bombing raid that he took part in, and ends thus:

Death, Grief, and Pain
Are what I give.
O that the slain
Might live—might live!
I know them not, for I have blindly killed,
And nameless hearts with nameless sorrow filled.
Thrice cursed War
Which bids that I
Such death should pour
Down from the sky.
O Star of Peace, rise swiftly in the East
That from such slaying men may be released.

One of the two outstanding British anti-war poets was Wilfred Owen. He joined the Army in 1915, and first entered the trenches in January, 1917, when he was twenty-three years old. He was appalled at once by the horror of stalemated warfare. In a letter of January 19th he calls No-man's-land "an abode of madness"; on February 4th he is calling the dead "the most execrable sights on earth," and adds, "In poetry we call them glorious"; on April 25th he writes, "The terribly long time we stayed unrelieved . . . makes us feel bitterly towards those in England who might relieve us and will not"; and in June, as he lies wounded in a hospital in France, it dawns upon him that "Christ's essential command was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill." And he goes on to say of this commandment: "I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed. . . . And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? . . . Thus you see how pure Christianity

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will not fit in with pure patriotism."—Nevertheless, having recovered from his wound, he was back in the fighting the next year, was awarded the Military Cross, and was killed in action November 4, 1918, a week before the Armistice.

His onomatopoeic "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is his most-quoted poem. Here are its first eight lines:

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Along with many lovely poems having for subject both scenes of war and scenes of peace, Owen wrote a group of fiercely realistic poems describing war's bestiality and horror. Moreover, he wrote a small number of poems satirizing or condemning various aspects of war. For the most part, these poems show the indifference, the ignorance, or the grandiloquently patriotic self-deception of the home-people concerning the horror and death to which they send their young men. Some of his poems, however, satirize the politicians responsible for war, the fatuousness of military red tape, and the mockery of religion in war. "These men are worth your tears," he says of the soldiers. "You are not worth their merriment."

But the most significant and influential of the anti-war poets is Siegfried Sassoon. An aristocratic young Englishman who had been through Marlborough and Cambridge, he enlisted in the British Army on August 3, 1914, two days after war was declared. He was wounded while raiding enemy trenches in France, and was invalided home in the spring of 1917. While convalescing, he began to think

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about the purposes for which he had been fighting, and came to the conclusion (which he wrote out and published) that England's leaders had never stated England's war aims, and that if these aims had been stated they would prove nationalistic and imperialistic. He adds: "I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. . . . On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of the agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize."

In spite of this protest, as well as of several pacifist articles that he published about the same time, a volume of anti-war poems also published just then, and his gesture of throwing into the Mersey the Military Cross which he had received for gallantry, Sassoon took to pacifism awkwardly. He hated the publicity it brought him, and he went through with it only because he thought he should. He waited for the military authorities to court-martial him; but instead of doing that, the authorities sent him to a sanitarium as a mental case, on the theory that only an insane person could oppose the War. After several months at the sanitarium, he "recovered," and was sent first to Palestine and later back to France. Here he was wounded again, and was recommended for the D. S. O., but refused further decoration. He came out of the War a captain.

Robert Graves writes pointedly of England's soldier poets: "We may remind ourselves of one or two outstanding facts usually overlooked: that Rupert Brooke saw many warlike scenes, but no actual fighting, that Robert Nichols,

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with the best of intentions, only saw three weeks' service in France and this on a quiet sector with the artillery: that of the other poets with reputations as War-poets not more than four or five . . . bore the heat and burden of the War; and that these unanimously vilified rather than celebrated the War; and that of these only Siegfried Sassoon published his verse while the War was still on."

Though exception may be taken to parts of this statement, the main point is true: Sassoon was the first British poet to publish genuinely anti-war verse before the end of the War. He had included a few unflinchingly realistic poems in *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (1917). But *Counter-Attack* (1918) contained not only some shocking realism, but also some bitter and cynical comments on the War and on the general public who sent young men out to die horribly in the trenches. This one book of Sassoon's makes him a major figure in the history of English literature. It is the first book of truly vital anti-war poems ever published in England. Furthermore, it precedes, by over ten years, that rash of anti-war novels (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Death of a Hero*, *Farewell to Arms*, *The Case of Sergeant Grischka*, and so on) which broke out in Europe and in America in the late 1920's. In this book Sassoon describes life at the front with a scalding truthfulness and a merciless realism that spare no detail of fear and horror. Perhaps there was never a more heart-sickening, more unpleasant volume of poetry than this—and at the same time there was never a volume more wholesome and courageous in its exposure of sham and its revelation of truth.

Some people, it may be remarked at this point, object to unpleasant poetry; they want to hear in poetry only about what Kipling calls "loves and doves." Answering such objectors, Stephen Crane, the American novelist, wrote in the

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spring of 1891: "I cannot see why people hate 'ugliness' in art. . . . The scene of Hamlet and his mother and the death of old Polonius behind the curtain is ugly, if you heard it in a police court. Hamlet treats his mother like a drunken carter and his words when he has killed Polonius are disgusting. But who cares?" Certainly "unpleasant" poetry is in the best tradition of English literature. Anglo-Saxon war poetry is not pleasant; Chaucer's descriptions of the Summoner and the Pardoner are not pleasant; Donne's morbid graveyard poems are not pleasant; Burns's greatest poem, "The Jolly Beggars," is not pleasant; practically none of Crabbe is pleasant; and a good part of Wordsworth and of Hardy is not pleasant. If, then, Sassoon's War poems are not pleasant, they have some excellent company.

In the blaze of their fierce truthfulness the idealistic War poems wither like lilies in a fire. After them, even the gallantry of Brooke's War sonnets fades into the semblance of mere lying prettiness, and the devoted consecration of poems like "In Flanders Fields" sounds like pathetic self-deception. To realize the full artistic and spiritual significance of these latter poems, one cannot read them on the same day that one reads Sassoon: the contrast kills them. With *Counter-Attack* begins sharply and definitely the mountain of anti-war literature of all types with which our generation has become so familiar. Imagining a time when there was no such mountain is almost impossible for the younger men and women of this generation; but before Sassoon there was not even a molehill in English literature to suggest the mountain.

It is one of the ironies of our time (it may be said as an aside) that the disapproval of war initiated among English-speaking people by Sassoon resulted in a disinclination of these people to employ force for the suppression of contemporary warrior-nations like Italy, Germany, and Japan.

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And, by a still further irony, our hatred of war is perhaps chiefly responsible for our present determination to crush these warrior nations so completely and finally that never again will they have the power to make war. It should be recorded, at any rate, that the man behind these two great ironies, Siegfried Sassoon, is a strong supporter of the Allied cause in the Second World War.

But today, even as in the First World War, Sassoon regards war from the *personal* point of view—as a personal tragedy to individual human beings. In the later days of the First World War he felt that nationalistic aims and imperialistic ambitions were obscuring this personal tragedy, and were alone responsible for the continuance of the War. Accordingly, he turned a passionate, but at the same time coldly ironic, satire upon the people who, he felt, were prolonging the War, upon the complacent elders who sent young men out to die under fearful mental and physical torture, and upon the stay-at-homes who blinded themselves to the War's horrors by befogging their minds with conventionally patriotic and cheerful fatuousness.

Here is one of Sassoon's more grimly humorous satirical pieces:

BASE DETAILS

If I were fierce and bald and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well.
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

Here is a piece of still more bitter satire, this time on the idealistic view of war:

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"THEY"

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race.
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face."

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change."
And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"

And here is a more thoughtful satire on what Sassoon regarded as the true social significance of war:

MEMORIAL TABLET

(Great War)

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight
(Under Lord Derby's scheme). I died in hell—
(They called it Passchendaele); my wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back, and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards; so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

In sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare;
For though low down upon the list, I'm there:
"In proud and glorious memory"—that's my due.
Two bleeding years I fought in France for Squire;
I suffered anguish that he's never guessed;
Once I came home on leave; and then went west.
What greater glory could a man desire?

Writing of Sassoon twelve years after the War, Edmund Blunden says: "It was his triumph to be the first man who even described war fully and exactly; and had description been all that he did, the feat would have been distinguished." But description was not all that he did. Filled with pity,

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"obsessed by the waste and agony, the physical and spiritual wreckage" caused by the War, and yet remaining objective in his manner, he writes War poems that, as Edwin Muir said in 1940, "are more economically fitted to their purpose than any other contemporary poetry; and their indignation is subdued to exact social criticism. They are effective because of the moderation they observe in the midst of furious indignation and pity . . . their force lies in their impersonality, which sets down with indignant economy the shame and horror of war."

V. POST-WAR DISILLUSION

On Sassoon's note of disillusion, disgust, and despair the poetry of the First World War ended. The note was prolonged for a few years while other poets continued saying very much the same things that Sassoon had said, but not saying them so well. Even these echoes, however, soon died away; and by 1924 Robert Graves, writing in an American journal, could report: "It is a curious thing, but the English habit is so strong in me that I find myself blushing to mention the War. . . . [In England] it may be emotionally and personally discussed behind closed doors between intimates, preferably at night; or it may be written about impersonally and historically in a three to five-dollar textbook complete with maps and appendices. But any other treatment is considered vulgar, anti-social, and disgusting."

A few high-minded Englishmen had gone out to France to defend certain noble moral ideals. With only one or two exceptions, the poets among these men (that is, those who were alive at the War's end) suffered complete disillusionment—disillusionment about the goodness of man, the perfection of civilization, national leaders, patriotic principles, humanitarian ideals, national virtue and international honor.

But most Englishmen had gone out to France to defend

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"This other Eden, demi-paradise. . . . This precious stone set in the silver sea. . . . This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England." When they came home, however, they found that the England for which they had fought no longer existed. In its stead they found an England of endless unemployment, doles, new and vulgar ways of living, political chicanery and treachery, diplomatic scheming, and time-serving governments falling continually between the stools of greedy reaction, on the one hand, and of incompetent liberalism, on the other. Some of the soldier-poets could not endure this England that they had fought to save. Richard Aldington withdrew first to the solitude of the Berkshire hills, then to France, and finally to America. Ford Madox Ford confessed, like Aldington, that he could not stand what England had become; and he too fled to France, and later to America. Louis Golding left England to wander all over the world, and has never gone back to his mother country to live. Robert Graves went to Egypt, but returned eventually to England, where he has become one of its most trenchant literary and social satirists. Edmund Blunden went on a long trip to South America, but later returned to England, and settled into the cloistered life of a scholar at Oxford.

It must be confessed that, in the years between the First World War and the Second, developments in England justified the poets in their disillusionment. The economic system was not able to avert the great depression of the 1930's; the political system was utterly unable to cope with it; and vast numbers of Englishmen endured unspeakable misery and degradation as a result of it. One of the major political parties, the Liberal, vanished in the wind of a politician's words; another, the Labor Party, collapsed because of treachery among its leaders; and the other major party, the Conservative, came into power only to launch itself and

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England on a career of national and international dishonor unparalleled since the reign of George III.

I am not one of those who believe that a people always get the kind of government they deserve. The French people, for example, have had, for fifteen years, governments much worse than they deserve. From 1931 to 1940 the English people, too, had a government which, in my opinion, was much worse than the English people deserved. This government seemed content to let millions of Englishmen live and die under conditions of malnutrition, dirt, and hopelessness that would have made America's own depression look like blooming prosperity; in quick succession this government betrayed China, Ethiopia, the League of Nations, democratic Spain, and Czecho-Slovakia; it broke treaties with America and France; and, to top everything, it raised not a finger to prevent (and, as many people believe, actually encouraged) the rise in Germany of the most ghastly evil the modern world has ever known.

Certain it is that none of the young and important British poets writing in the fifteen years before the Second World War had any respect for contemporary British civilization, or confidence in its destiny. Instead, they felt only the despair of those who have hoped high hopes and suffered bitter disillusion, only the self-disgust of those who have held the apple of all desire in their hands and have been too weak to grasp it, only the grief of those who have arrived at the gates of the Celestial City and have been dragged back from them by the hands of greed and folly.

VI. POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

When the long-gestated Second World War was born to expectant Europe in September, 1939, British poets did not greet the new arrival with the enthusiastic patriotism which

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poets had shown at the beginning of the previous War. Reasons for their apathy were several. For one thing, the 1930's had been too desperately concerned with economic problems to be a really poetic decade; therefore relatively few people were either reading or writing poetry in 1939. For another thing, the "phony war" (as it was called before May, 1940) and the business-as-usual policy adopted by the Chamberlain government were hardly calculated to inspire new poetic expression. And finally, the poets who had been predicting the approach of doom for fifteen years could not be much moved by discovering that the doom they had predicted was upon them.

Nevertheless, a good many books of War poetry have appeared in England since the War began. Many of them are by single individuals, but, by an interesting development in publishing customs, many others have been issued with the names of several poets on their title pages. Something like fifteen volumes of predominantly War poetry were published through regular channels in 1940, about twenty in 1941, and about a dozen so far this year. Many of these books are of little consequence, being merely descriptive of bombing raids, or topical in nature, or dedicatory. Others, however, have something to say, and a worthy manner of saying it.

I cannot distinguish any evolutionary development in these new War poems. For years the foremost British poets have known and proclaimed that evil is loose in the world. Unlike the British poets of 1914, however, they have believed that the evil is confined to no one nation, but is a universal evil infecting the whole social system of the western world. As Frederick Prokosch's line, written in 1941, puts it:

The evil implicit in our age, like dust falls everywhere.

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And W. H. Auden, in a book published in 1940, but in a poem written just before the War, says much the same thing:

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;
Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face.

But though the poets of this new War see an entire social system cankered with evil, they are uniformly convinced that the Nazi power in Germany is the most abominable of these evils. Without believing (as the British poets of 1914 believed) that British civilization is good, they know that Nazi barbarism is worse. Accordingly, there has been absolute unity of opinion among all the contemporary British War poets, even the most pessimistic, that humanity's most urgent task is to destroy the Nazi evil. Nor is there diversity of opinion as to the War's outcome. Not even in the blackest hours of 1940 was any British poet, so far as I know, a defeatist.

The chief diversity that exists among these poets is the elemental pessimism of some and the elemental optimism of others.

a. The pessimists feel that even when the United Nations have destroyed Nazism, there will still be left in the world enough social, political, and economic evil to destroy the civilization that we know. As one of them, John Gawsworth, says:

The soul of man is on the march
To its last bivouac—death.

But though these pessimists think that the fight against evil must be ultimately vain, they know, like the Spartans at Thermopylae, that honorable men can do no other than con-

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tinue the fight against evil. Thus, Herbert Read, a soldier-poet of the First World War, writing in 1940, tells "A Conscript of 1940":

If you can go
Knowing that there is no reward, no certain use
In all your sacrifice, then honour is reprieved.

b. More characteristically, however, the British War poets feel that, somehow, there will come from this War, *must* come from it, a spiritual regeneration of all mankind. They feel that we who have been forced to defend liberty, humanity, justice, and love against Nazi slavery, cruelty, injustice, and hate are even now in the process of reaffirming in our hearts those values which we had almost forgotten until we were called upon to defend them. Even so strong a critic of the pre-War world as C. Day Lewis writes of this War:

Now, as never before, when man seems born to hurt
And a whole wincing earth not wide enough
For his ill will, now is the time we assert
To their face that men are love.

In most of the War poetry now being written this is the main theme—that all the evil in the world cannot destroy in men the will to do good to their fellowmen; that out of this bloodbath of War will emerge a better world, a more humane and loving world, than that which emerged from the First World War.

In this lecture I have tried to show how British poets entered the First World War as enthusiastic patriots, courageous Englishmen, lovers and defenders of England. But as that War progressed, they became disillusioned with its aims, and began to feel that human beings are more important than nationalistic ideals. After that War, the poets grew disillusioned with England herself because they felt that the English government and a considerable part of the

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English people were following a selfish and "realistic" policy that had no relation to the welfare of humanity as a whole. The poets of this present War have no gallant and romantic longing to make some corner of a foreign field forever England; they desire instead to insure for all mankind, not merely for Englishmen, a world which (as one of these British poets has said) will be fit for a child to live in.

GEORGE GUION WILLIAMS.

